Newspapers by ancestry
https://www.newspapers.com/image/426769150

Downloaded on Mar 26, 2024

B2

I positioned my first radio next to my bed to receive its one flickering signal.

A ROCK 'N' ROLL LIFE

RODRIGUEZ I thought of writing about music.

CONTINUED FROM B1

You could always recognize a Motown record (The Sound of Young America): high treble notes, echoed rhythm sections (as if recorded inside a barrel), tambourines, surreal jazzy underpinnings (pithy hints of vibraphone). Echoed stomping noises heralded the Supremes' Where Did Our Love Go. (Or was it their newer, rush-released Baby Love?) You couldn't miss the yearning of the Four Tops' heartbreaking Baby I Need Your Loving ("got to have all your lovin'").

There was the surf sound: I Get Around by the Beach Boys, standing up for America in the onslaught of the British Invasion (with the immortal line of teen dissatisfaction, "I'm gettin' bugged drivin' up 'n' down the same old strip / I gotta find a new place where the kids are hip"), and Jan & Dean's funny, cool The Little Old Lady from Pasadena. There was nonsense funk as fashioned by Manfred Mann's Do Wah Diddy Diddy — sometimes you could switch stations and hear another "diddy diddy" almost at the same time, like a tape loop. Foot-stomping announced Glad All Over and Bits and Pieces by the Dave Clark Five. Sometimes you might be tricked into thinking it was the intro to Where Did Our Love Go.

All this stuff was crammed in and spewed out. Just a short time earlier, radio had been oozing sappy ballads, manufactured pap. This was a breath — a gulp — of fresh air. From my perspective, it was what Dylan meant when he sang, a year later, "You know something is happening, but you don't know what it is / Do you, Mr. Jones?"

This was something I wanted to study, maybe write about. Only problem was, nobody was writing about it, except as social phenomena like the Beatles, Elvis or Sinatra.

Flash-forward to 1979. Rock had exploded as show business throughout the decade — necessitating rock critics at newspapers — and concerts were like Dante's Inferno to me: spewing smoke and flashing lights and godawful din; the roars and chants and raised arms, like Nazi rallies. And the puke, in the toilets and the aisles. At a Kiss show, I slipped on a puddle of hurl and for the longest moment was twisting in the aisle, desperately trying to avoid landing in it. I returned to The Gazette to be told I had 12 column inches to fill. "Are you kidding!?" I blustered. "They're not worth 12 f—ing inches! Run some photos — that's what they're all about, anyway!" I managed, in a desultory fog, to type out four inches, including: "For every heavy rocket fire of sound, there was a change of lighting but, after a while, it got pretty dull. ... There was no real emotion put into the music — perhaps there was no real emotion to be had."

I could've been writing about myself. It wasn't supposed to be this way.

FROM GAZETTE FILES

Elvis Presley on the Ed Sullivan Show: His 1956 debut on the program was Juan Rodriguez's first major experience with pop, at age eight.

FRANCOIS GALLOCHET

Juan Rodriguez, left, and Simon Schneiderman attend the opening of Le Drug — a multi-functional space whose attractions included an art gallery — on de la Montagne St. in 1965. That same year, the two friends snuck into a hotel on Guy St. and found themselves face to face with the Rolling Stones (pictured above in 1964).

Watching Elvis Presley's debut on the Ed Sullivan Show in 1956 was my first major pop experience, at age eight. The occasion was so keenly anticipated that my parents dimmed the living room lights. I still hear screams and squeals from the studio audience, and see Ed's stone face betrayed by his wildly darting eyes: Chaos could reign without warning.

Elvis was a gyrating blur, flashing a lascivious yet oddly shy leer. A couple visiting from Ohio — hubby with a crewcut, wife with a starched hairdo — gazed in stunned horror. My father commented with his usual "I don't see what all the fuss is about." My mother was more charitable, noting Presley's "good voice." Of course, young people didn't care whether or not his voice was "good." We cared that Elvis was us, dancin' to the Jailhouse Rock and busting out.

My first radio was a yellow crystal kit. I positioned it on the wall next to my bed at night to receive its one flickering signal — a station that played rock 'n' roll. It sounded like something from New York City, but it was actually from St-Jérôme in the Laurentians. Soon, when I graduated to a transistor radio — the iPod of its day — I actually did receive New York City (with DJ "Cousin" Bruce Morrow). When they played one of Roy Orbison's painfully lonely hits, with a voice that seemed operatic — The Crowd, It's Over, Running Scared and, of course, Only the Lonely — the world stopped in its tracks.

By the late '50s, graduating to folk music was a sure sign of growing up, leaving behind the teen world of puppy love and becoming socially conscious. Folk was pure, steeped in the tradition of the troubadour from Elizabethan times, the country singer (preferably from Appalachia), the Mississippi bluesman. Rock 'n' roll was strictly commercial, and hence corrupt. The payola scandals that nailed Alan Freed, the first R&R disc jockey, and implicated American Bandstand's clean-cut Dick Clark — whose Teflon demeanour was as impenetrable as the anti-acne Clearasil he flogged — were proof that without crass record companies paying DJs to get their product on the radio, such bilge might vaporize. Besides, pop stars were poetic: "Splish splash, I was takin' a bath," gurgled Bobby Darin.

I asked Keith Richards, in the parlance of the day: "Is all this really happening, man?" He awed us: "We haven't come this far not to play for keeps."

Popsters were flavours of the month; folkies were in it for the long haul. Teen idols were phony, manufactured; folksingers were real people, untainted by a craven desire for fame and fortune. While pop acts larded albums with filler, folksingers loaded theirs with substance. Pop stars were monosyllabic; folkies were thoughtful. My socialist parents, friends with impresario Sam Gesser, took me many times to see the morally superior Pete Seeger, who, fresh out of Harvard, had lived the itinerant life — hooking up with the legendary Woody Guthrie — and now lectured us on the ways of the wicked world as if he was our grandfather. It was a black-and-white, one-or-the-other world.

Then the Beatles — followed by legions of other British groups — invaded America, and folk was dead.

In the summer of '64 I wore a wool pullover, and sometimes a scarf, aping Mick Jagger's look in teen magazines. I wanted bullets, but it was a small price to pay for feeling cool.

The Rolling Stones' eponymous debut album blasted black rhythms; their copycat music reeked of authenticity, codes to a cool world. The Stones were mod esthetes who gave us an insider's carte blanche into outsider music, black music — blues, R&B, soul and jazz. (Charlie Watts, we were informed, was a jazz drummer who worshipped Charlie Parker.) We wanted to dig everything the Stones dug: Chuck Berry, Bo Diddley, Muddy Waters, Jimmy Reed, Willie Dixon, Otis Redding, Marvin Gaye. And yet on their disastrous debut U.S. tour in June 1964, the Stones virtually disappeared in the vortex of Beatlemania. But we fans — the select few in the underground — just knew.

Of course, you couldn't mention the Stones without referencing the Beatles. The Beatles were cute; the Stones — standing in the shadow, baby — were ugly. The Beatles were melodists with a beat; the Stones rolled black and blue. The Beatles sang barbershop harmonies; dissonance was as close to harmony as the Stones came. Though I was a Beatles fan, I was a Stones man.

The biggest surprise was how small the Stones were. On April 22, 1965, with The Last Time riding high on the charts, they arrived in Montreal to kick off their third crack at North America. My friend Simon Schneiderman and I tracked them down to what is now the Hotel Espresso on Guy St.; when the front-desk guy nervously said "no Stones here," we knew we'd hit pay dirt. We took the service elevator out back to the top floor.

It was like a scene from The Shining: an empty hotel corridor, luggage outside each of seven wide-open doors. Mick was stretched out on a bed intently poring over fan mail! Charlie Watts was sacked out trying to sleep off the flu. Bill Wyman — "old Stone face," not nearly as ugly as he appeared in photos — chatted amiably in a surprisingly light voice.

Keith Richards, in a choirboy bob, wearing new blue jeans and cowboy boots, aimlessly twanged on a gleaming, rust-coloured country guitar. When I asked him, awkwardly, "Is this all real? Like, is all this really happening, man?" — in the parlance of the day — he awed us: "We haven't come this far not to play for keeps."

Copyright © 2024 Newspapers.com. All Rights Reserved.

Powered by Newspapers.com